AN PPROPRIATE PEITY
MATHEW 5:14-16, 6:1-18

Broadway

JANUARY 9, 1972
JOHN H. BUCHANAN

I always find myself deeply moved by what we have done this morning. I suppose it's partly because it reminds me of an occassion nine years ago when I knelt and felt the weight of hands on my head. And beyond that it reminds me of growing up in a Presbyterian Congregation and being vaguely aware of those memerable old men who sat on the front pews on Communion Sunday. That was at the end of the era in which election to the Session in a Presbyterian Church was for life, and elders were old.

But beyond that, I find myself moved by what we've done because it's been happening in much the same way for more than four hundred years: in Geneva, Switzerland, as John Calvin laid his hands on the heads of the Elders of the Consistory: and in Scotland, where they called it the Presbyterian Kirk, and where the Elders often signed a Covenant with their own blood to defend the purity of the faith and the peace of the Kirk.

And beyond that, even, to the very earliest days of Christian History, when struggling churches met in catacombs and darkened hourses, and elected men from among their number to bear responsibility for the life of the Church. They were called PRESBYTEROS in Greek, which translates Elders, and they were set aside for their responsibility by prayer and the laying on of hands.

I am reminded of all of that as we set aside men and women from among our number to be Elders and Deacons. I am aware as we do it, that the life and effectiveness of this particular congregation rests heavily on their shoulders. They will not get much credit for the work they will do in three years. Its not a glamorous job. But what they do and how they do it: all the night meetings, all the planning, all the hours they will invest, will be the power that propells this church in the near future.

They have been singled out and set aside for a specific task. They are now conspicuous in their identity with the cause of Jesus Christ. And I would like to use the occasion to reflect on what that means, in a way that will bear on everyone of us as we attempt to follow our Lord faithfully.

What is the appropriate life-style for a confessing Christian? What kinds of things does a Christian do? What is an appropriate Christian piety?

I have chosen to talk about it today because sometimes people decline an office in the church because they don't feel "religious" enough. Sometimes, likewise, people don't join the church for the same reason: they don't feel "[illegible] life: they have some standard, some list of things a [illegible]stitute" and frankly aren't too impressed with the prospect of [illegible]o they back away. And it is at this point that I would like to [illegible]stion about the whole matter of what is appropriate peity and who [illegible] to do the defining.

Before we begin, however, let's take two soundings: first, in the area of psychology or psychoanalysis; and second in the area of our particular culture's definition of piety.

We know from the psychological disciplines, that human motives are very, very complex. In fact, it might be said that no motive is ever simple; we do what we do usually for a whole lot of reasons, some of which may not even be conscious. And, with a strong background of Calvinism, we might say that no motive is ever entirely pure. Motivationally, we are a mixed bag. We do good things, sometimes for the wrong reasons, and bad things, sometimes for the right reasons, and inside each of us is a labyrinth of motivation and needs and desires that no one totally comprehends, except God - and th[illegible] worries us a bit. Because sometimes we know ourselves better than we wis[illegible] we did.

In any case, think about -ove: love between a man and a woman. What motivates it? What creates it? Is it just there, lying dormant in our psyc[illegible] waiting for the right person to happen along? Is it a pristine, pure emotion that flows, unfittered from our heart.? Or is it conditioned and influenced by other considerations? Does human love happen in a vacuum or is it dependent

on someone to return it? In literature Dante loved Beatrice from a distance: he worshipped and idolozed her. But he never met her. And realism demands that we acknowledge the mythology of that kind of pure, unanswered love. We love because we feel it - but also, at least in part, because we are interested in being loved. Take that away: take away any possibility of our receiving something and our feelings of love are very much inclined to diminish and then evaporate.

In the practice of religion - piety - the same observations may be made. We are religious because we feel it, but there are side benefits. And who is to say which are more important. It is an act of piety to get up on a cold, January morning and come to church: and we do it because we feel as if we ought to or need to. But it doesn't hurt to know that our neighbors will see us and think highly of us for our devoutness.

That's the first sounding: human motive are very complex and we need to proceed with great caution whenever we think we know why people do the things they do. The second sounding has to do with our culture's definition of appropriate piety. Webster defines pious as "manifesting devotion; zealous in prayer and acts of worship"; and piety as "dutifulness in religion: devoutness." Now, our culture assumes that it knows what that means for a Christian and expects certain behavior patterns as the norm. Our culture assumes that it is appropriate peity to pray before P.T.A. meetings, football games and service club banquets. Our culture assumes that piety means a certain predictable life style and vocabulary. Consider the furor created when the Journal-Courier quoted an explative several weeks ago in reference to a man's recollection of Pearl Harbor. American piety surfaced in those anquished souls who didn't want the Lord's name taken in vain - even in print. And not a word was spoken about the fact that the nasty phrase preceded the word "Jap". It's O K to call Japenese Japs, or blacks - niggers: but don't precede it with four letter anglo-saxónisma. I don't know if God ever laughs in his heaven - but surely he must have in the middle of that little absurdity.

That's the second sounding: our culture has a definition of piety that is very superficial and that has very little to do with being a Christian.

Jesus has quite a bit to say about piety. In fact, he lived in a culture which thought it knew all there was to know about the practice of religion. And he got himself into a lot of trouble by violating the standards of piety of that culture; by digging beneath the outward forms in the inner motivations.

Piety, to a first century Jew, was a way of life. A devout man practiced his religion in three basic ways. First, alms giving. The good Jew gave a tithe, a tenth of all he had, and on top of that he gave alms for charity and the support of the poor. The tithe was expected: alms were 'icing on the cake'. At certain times during the year a trumpet was sounded to signal a special offering. And Jesus suggested that some men were using that occasion for a public display of generosity. He suggested that a man who was really interested in doing God's will would be so inconspicuous about it that his left hand wouldn't know what his right hand was giving.

Second, praying. Three times daily, at appointed times a good Jew stopped whatever he was doing, turned toward Jerusalem and prayed. Jesus suggested that some men were arranging to be on the busiest corner, or in the middle of the market place, at the appointed time. And that their praying was done for the benefit of the audience. He suggested that appropriate piety was finding a secret place, and there praying to God - who knows what's going on anyway.

Third, fasting. As an act of penance and devotion fasting was prescribed several times a year. But the really pious fasted twice a week, on Monday and Thursday. And it was the custom to be very visible about it - to dawn a sack cloth, to smear mud and ashes on one's face, and to walk around the crowded streets moaning and groaning. Jesus suggested that it was all a show: that these fasters were actually enjoying their martyrdom: that the goal of the piety was public recognition. Appropriate fasting, he suggested, was invisible. 'Wash your faces: he told them, 'no one ought to know what you are about but God".

Now, it is possible I suppose, to deduce from this that, one, since the church seems to be the institution must interested in public displays of piety and since Jesus saw the phoniness of such displays, he would be opposed to the church. And two that a man can be a totally individualistic, that is to say, an invisible Chrisitan. Both are possible, but both are wrong.

Jesus took for granted that his disciples would give alms and fast and pray. He was no opponent of institutional religion. The question for him - and for us - is, "for what reason are these things done? The hypocrites, as he called them, did these things in order to be seen and recognized. And they got their reward. They were applauded for their piety. The account was closed, and he wanted no part of it. Yet he did not oppose piety, appropriately practiced.

In fact, earlier in the Sermon on the Mount, from which our lesson was taken this morning, he said "Let your light so shine before men that they will see your good works and give glory to your-father who is in heaven".

Know there's a paradox - "Beward of practicing your piety before men" and "Let your light so shine." What he meant, I would suggest, is that Christian discipleship is very visible, it is to be practiced in the world: but acts of devotion, religious acts that could be the cause of admiration - and not to be done for the sake of display. They are, rather, private matters of the heart.

Our N. T. interpreter puts it this way: "Show when tempted to hide: and hide when tempted to show" (Expositors' Greek Testament)

Jesus Christ called his men to a life of discipleship: a disciplined life of following him in the world. That is the model for the appropriate practice of Christian Religion. He told his disciples that things like peace and love and reconciliation and standing with the poor and oppressed were the things that really mattered - not how many times a day they prayed, or whether their vocabulary was fit to be used around a polite dinner table.

He told them that this life of following him would be hard and misunderstood and risky. So it is still. He warned them that if they lived the life they